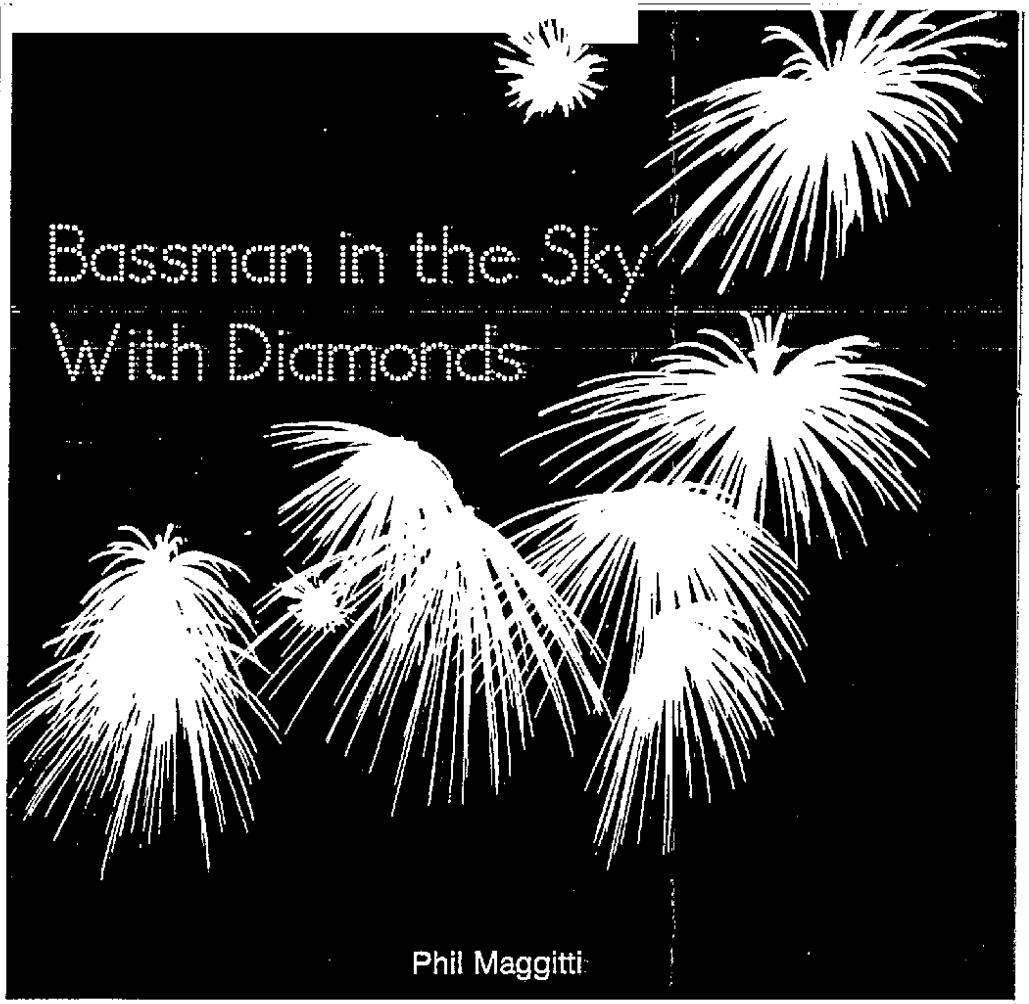

The signature is awesome. Red, yellow, blue, and gold in a phantasmagoric rush. With a whoop and a whoosh and a holler it gains an exuberant purchase on the eye. Bursting like a supernova—not across the heavens—but across the bottom of a business letter. Left to right. Red, rococo letters on a pale blue wash, escorted by a blizzard of glittering, golden gracenotes. It's enough to make you wonder, as Blake did in a different context, what immortal hand...?

The hand belongs to Bruce Bassman. Bassman—as the earth-bound, flush-with-the-left-margin typing beneath the high-flying signature reveals—is a pyrotechnic choreographer. In the employ of Garden State Fireworks. Two-time World Champions in their field.

Bassman's aerial displays—not merely set, but ingeniously woven to music in a thirty-minute extravaganza of color, texture, and form—have been causing necks to crane and mouths to hang slack in amazement all across the country for the last seven years. Amidst dazzling permutations of chrysanthemums, spiderwebs, starbursts, and changing geometric shapes, Bassman has hurled an exploding representation of an American flag into the sky above the Baltimore harbor for New Year's Eve, tossed "humming birds and mystic butterflies" into the air around the Washington Monument on the Fourth of July, peppered the California night with peonies on the occasion of LA's 202nd birthday, and—most recently—sent a screaming eagle into the pin-striped, DuPont Company heavens above Hagley Museum. Talk about better living through chemistry.

And these are merely random highlights. A Bruce Bassman production lasts thirty mind-boggling minutes, consumes as many as 3,500 shells, takes anywhere from three to five days and six to eighteen assistants to set up, and costs roughly $1,000 a minute. The musical accompaniment—which can range from the Bee Gees to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in one show—is projected through a 10,000-watt sound system and often simulcast over a local radio station. Not bad for someone who originally set out to become a speech therapist.

Bruce Bassman, pyrotechnic choreographer, graduated from Emerson College—after changing majors—with a degree in theater arts. "I specialized in stage management," he says, "which is very similar to what I do now."

Between college and what he does now, Bassman spent fifteen years in the theater as a free-lance technician, designing sets and lighting for off-Broadway and offbeat groups like the James Joyce Memorial Liquid Theater, which functioned without benefit of script or direction. He also created seasonal decorations: "Christmas trees, Easter eggs, and flashing pumpkin, for Halloween." Just when Bassman was becoming "slightly bored" with his non-routine routine, Macy's—as it does for so many bored New Yorkers—came to the rescue.

To be precise, Macy's asked Bruce to help them. "One year their fireworks display came out all disco," he reports. "Macy's *freaked*." (You'd freak, too, if you spent $100,000 and got disco.)

"So they came to my house," explains Bassman, "and said, 'Can you do anything about this?'"

The rest, as they say in the writing trade when they need a quick bridge, is history. The next year Macy's hired Bassman to be their permanent fireworks consultant. And Bassman, a nice Jewish boy from the Bronx became a shining, free-spirited star in what he once described as "an Italian, conservative business." That business will probably never be the same. Bassman intends to do for fireworks what Dr. J. did for the slam dunk and Calvin Klein did for underwear: turn it into an art form.

Indeed, no less an authority than *Smithsonian* magazine has already credited Bassman with reviving "the wedding of royal fireworks to music." But, demurs Bassman, "that was a slight inaccuracy. A bit of an overstatement.

"The Royal Fireworks Music," Bassman explains, "is a very famous piece that Handel wrote in 1749. Everyone thinks that fireworks were coordinated to it, but that isn't true. They played the piece like an overture and then shot a mess of fireworks afterwards.

"Whether Handel would have been pleased or not," muses Bassman to himself, "that's a thing I often think about." And the listener can't be sure whether he's referring to *Smithsonian's* reworking of history or his own work in the sky.

But if he didn't revive the wedding of royal fireworks to music, what exactly is it that Bassman *has* done?

"I brought into reality an idea that a number of people have had as a fantasy for a long time," Bassman declares. He acknowledges that "for years people *have* been playing music and shooting fireworks to it; but there had never been a clearly thought-out relationship between the two. Maybe someone would know that a certain quiet part of the music took thirty seconds, and they would have a barrage of Roman candles that took thirty seconds to go with it.

"That's a beginning," Bassman allows. "I go one step further. I'm not just trying to get the fireworks to happen at the same time as the music—to begin with the music and end with it. I'm trying to get them to *look like* the mu-

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sic. To show the movement of the music."

In order to do that, Bassman dons the earphones and hunkers down with pencil, paper, and calculator in his West Side apartment, losing himself in musical nuance. "First I have to chart each piece," he says, "to find out what's happening in the music. Then I try to get an idea of where I want the fireworks to be. Next I have to decide what fireworks to use. Then I have to figure out how they can be put together so that it will actually happen the way I want it to."

That's what Bassman refers to as "the exciting part." There's also the question of logistics: meetings with insurance companies, the transit authority, police department, fire department, the coast guard on occasion, and the civil aeronautics board. Add this to the time it takes to get the fireworks right, and preparation for a thirty-minute display can run weeks or even months.

When he first began choreographing fireworks, Bassman worked as a freelancer, much as he had in the theater. But ultimately he decided that "the only way I could get any kind of excitement into my life was to do the same thing day after day."

Therefore, at an age when most people begin looking to break out of the mold, Bassman, forty-three, began looking for one to slip into. He was serious enough about the idea to take the major step of owning a car. Fortunately, he had gotten his driver's license two years before.

Bassman's first full-time employer is Garden State Fireworks in Millington, New Jersey, founded by Augusto Santore in 1890. Santore's interest in fireworks is said to have begun in Naples ten years previous to that when, as a boy of nine, he accidently set fire to a clothesline festooned with his aunt's linens. Today Santore's grandsons Augie and Nunzio, with a little help from scores of immediate relatives, carry on the family tradition.

"They eat, sleep, and live fireworks," Bassman marvels. "They *know* fireworks. They think every shell should be a masterpiece."

This perfectionist approach is well suited to Bassman's equally perfectionist, albeit otherworldly view, of his art. As he explained to one writer, Bassman considers fireworks "a sacrifice to the gods." And himself a high priest. He isn't sure exactly which gods the sacrifice is going to, but he is sure that *that* isn't the relevant question.

"The god you pray to isn't important," Bassman maintains. "The thing which changes us is that we pray. God isn't going to change because you pray to *him*. God is already giving you everything. You just have to open up your consciousness to that. And one of the ways you do so is by changing yourself through prayer and sacrifice, doing good deeds, or helping old ladies across the street. Fireworks, on a grander scale, is one way of acting that out."

When the act works, Bassmans relates, "I feel very pleased. But I wouldn't say euphoric. Many people involved with fireworks in the traditional sense seem to get e-NOR-mous joy and reward out of shooting the shell. For me, the preparation is just as significant. I get enormous joy out of building the show, designing it, and planning it. After all, that's most of my work. The show only takes half an hour. If I'm counting on getting all my goodies in that half hour, I'm going to be very disappointed. Getting there is *more* than half the fun. Besides, when it's all over, there's nothing left but ashes and burnt cardboard," Bassman laughs.

Nevertheless, he vigorously maintains that the going up is worth the coming down. "I think it's important," Bassman concludes, "to tap into periods of celebration because they can make your life more meaningful. It it's all the same, the same, the same—from hour to hour and day to day without any fireworks—it's dull."

Handel, no question about it, would agree.

Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/kpnn0004